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# BURNS, THE POET OF DEMOCRACY.

BY HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE.

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FRANCIS JEFFREY was arrested on High Street, in Edinburgh, one morning, years ago, by the figure of a young man of striking nobility of bearing and flashing black eyes. As he stood looking, the door of a shop opened and a man came out, put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Aye, laddie, ye may weel look at that man; that's Robbie Burns." There Robbie Burns still stands. Scotland began to look at him in 1786, when the first book of poems came unannounced from Kilmarnock; the English-speaking world has been looking at him for decades. There he stands with those flashing eyes which enthralled Walter Scott; as much a part of Scotland as Arthur's Seat, or Stirling Castle, or Ben Nevis, or those Highland glens through which the clouds pass and repass in endless procession; as the moors, beautiful beyond speech in a silence which is the presence of Nature herself. Burns is Scotland as mountain, loch and moor can never be; he is Scotland incarnate in genius and character; Scotland, pathetic with the tragedy of hard conditions and stern toil and austere poverty; Scotland, victorious in the unbending will, the regal state of the unconquerable spirit, the power of second sight, the vision touching the rugged landscape of work and care with a beauty beyond that which sometimes makes those lowering western skies glorious as the gates of Heaven; Scotland, vital with the humor that springs out of the sense of man's blunders and trivialities against the background of his immortality—the laughter, born of faith and courage and tears, that has been the refuge of Scotland in many a tragic year.

Last summer, in a single week, several thousand people passed through Ayrshire; some of them idle and curious tourists; many of them drawn by the sense of kinship and gratitude that has

made Stratford dear to those who know the greatness of man and the pathos of his fortunes; that makes the Poet's Corner of Westminster as sacred as the altar; that keeps a fresh rose beside the bust of Longfellow; that renews perpetually the wreaths on the coffins of the two poets side by side in the Grand-Ducal vaults at Weimar.

Scotland owed Burns a debt that never can be paid; but how much he owed Scotland! He was born to a great heritage. The fibre of Scotch character—the character developed in a country where there is no servile class, no peasantry waiting hat in hand as the privileged pass by, no brood of beggars living on the dole of the fortunate; where, from the humblest firesides, the passion for learning sends an army of young barbarians, scornful of ease and enamoured of penury, to Glasgow and Aberdeen, to St. Andrews and Edinburgh—the fibre of Scotch character was his; and, before he wrote the song of modern democracy—the exultant chant of the man who counts because he is a man—Scotland had lived by that creed and died for it. Stern independence, lofty pride, dauntless courage—these were in the blood of the Scotch. They were often monarchists, they were never courtiers; they could die for their kings, but they could not bend the knee to them.

Rugged as their climate and soil made them, thrifty and laborious as stern conditions compelled them to be, standing century after century, sword in hand, with their backs to the wall, they were always lovers of poetry, dreamers of dreams, spinners of stories, children of romance, given to impossible loyalties and lost causes, frugally counting the cost to the utmost penny, and then casting prudence to the wind and putting the last penny to the hazard in some desperate idealism. This is the very stuff of poetry—heroic character and daring imagination, the warp and woof of the Scotch nature; stern as Knox, tender as Effie Deans. No one who has seen Scotland, who has looked at her rugged and often magnificent landscape, has failed to feel the invisible and brooding spirit that envelops that landscape like an atmosphere, and reveals its presence in a thousand humble ways.

A Scotch writer of distinction told me a few years ago that in the May of that season he had been in the Isle of Skye, where he had been known since childhood. As he walked one day up a path on the rugged coast he came to a little hut in which

lived an old Highlander; a man past eighty, who could neither read nor write, and had never been off the Island. The door stood open, and the little house was empty. Looking up the path, he saw the old man standing a little in advance, his head bowed and his bonnet in his hand. He hesitated a moment to speak to him; then, when the old Highlander raised his head, he said, "Sandy, I didn't interrupt you because I thought you might be at your devotions." "Well, not exactly that," was the answer, "I have come out here every morning for forty years and taken off my bonnet to the beauty of the world." In a country in which illiterate old men go out and bow to the splendor of the universe the poet and romancer are bound to appear.

Burns owes Scotland a great debt for his education. He is often classed with Shakespeare and Lincoln as an example of what the uneducated man can do; as if genius had no need of training. What is education? Is it a beaten highway, or is it any path that takes a man to the summit? Is it a system of study, or the enrichment of the spirit and the setting free of the personality? Is it discipline and knowledge, solely; or is it the awakening of the imagination, the creative faculty that has formulated the religions, and built the temples, and sung the songs, and written the poems, and discovered the continents, and ruled humanity not by the petty interests of the hour, but with that vision of the future which we call statesmanship? Education? Is it rule and measure; is it method and process; or is it the firing of a man's soul, the loosing of a man's hand, the invigorating of a man's will for the great adventure of life? Shakespeare was not immersed in the knowledge of the schools, but he was plunged headlong into the knowledge of life; Lincoln was, for his work, the best-trained American of his time. Burns, the greatest of song-writers, the most vivid, moving, heart-lightening, heart-breaking poet of the Scotch home, the Scotch fields, the Scotch rivers and the elemental passions asleep or stirring in the souls of men, had the best, because the most vital, education; and the only education that counts with a man of genius is that which vitalizes and inspires. Burns had three rare teachers: one, a country schoolmaster who taught him the only thing he needed to know by rule,—the meaning of words and how to make the simplest speech serve the highest uses of the imagination; another, the bonny Ayrshire lassie who was

his mother, who sowed by the way when the virgin soil lay open to every night of dew and every morning of light; who took him by the hand and led him to the greatest of his teachers—to Scotland waiting for her poet in the fairyland of legend, song and story. In the days when his imagination was opening to the wonder of life, she bathed him in the running streams of poesy that flowed from the deep places among the hills, and made the homes of labor and hardship beautiful as the flowers that are set in the little gardens; and, years after, when Burns fell on his knees in Dunfermline and kissed the spot where rests the heart of Bruce, he knelt at the innermost shrine of his education. He learned the songs of Scotland by heart, repeating them as he drove his plough or walked to his work; sounding their music to the depths and mastering their magic by the ear, which is the secret of his command of the poetry that sings. After a generation of teaching poetry by text-book, chart, blackboard, lecture and examination, we shall be compelled to go back to the training which the Greek boys got from their Homer; which Shakespeare received when England was a nest of singing birds; which came to Burns and Scott from the poetry floating like the clouds in the air above Scotland.

Suddenly, out of his obscure youth, the ploughman, born in a clay house on the road that runs from the Bridge of Doon to Ayr, emerged into fame; to touch the country about him, river and vale and village, with the light that gives immortality to all upon which it rests.

He was not to deal with the rich results of thought, as Tennyson did; nor with the free impulse of personality, daring to assert its right and use its power, as Browning did; nor was he to record the reaction of knowledge on faith, as Arnold did; his business lay with the human heart and its elemental passions, with the great strains of independence, self-reliance, indifference to badges of success and the insignia of place and power. It was his to render the landscape of Scotland with unrivalled power of truth and imagination, to fling wide the door to the Scotch fireside without violating its sanctities, to give the elemental passions a voice vibrant with pathos and mirth and tenderness, to strike the keynote of democracy with resonant and compelling authority.

He became a poet of the fireside and of the sturdy Scotch in-

tegrity; the most intimate singer that Scotland has ever known, and the dearest; the most daring poet of manhood who has set the soul of democracy to music. He was strongest when he was dealing with the simplest human emotions in the simplest speech; his art was weak only when it yielded to the influence of sophisticated society. It was in the fields that he found the "wee, modest, crimson-tipped flower" and the "wee, sleekit, tim'rous beastie"; it was in the simplest homes that he saw the tender and beautiful drama of the family in the "Cotter's Saturday Night"; it was out of such homes that Mary Morrison and Highland Mary came; it was at the wayside inn, on the country road, and in the highway about the rural kirk that he found "Tam o' Shanter," "Holy Willie's Prayer," keen to the edge of irreverence with biting irony, the "Address to the Deil," the "Holy Fair"; it was out of the very heart of Scotland that "Auld Lang Syne," "John Anderson, my Jo," "Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast," and "A Man's a Man For a' That," issued like fresh streams from hidden springs.

Burns had great gifts: a striking personality; an imagination at once daring, graphic and poetical; a vigorous and powerful mind that in any field would have put him with the best; a rich, rollicking, audacious humor, one of the rarest and greatest of original endowments; a heart that knew all the depths of pathos, a hand that could touch all its keys, and a genius for using words as if he had made them. He had also the great gift of passion which is part of the creative impulse, though he suffered it too often to inflame rather than to inspire him. His, too, was a penetrating and destructive irony which gives "Holy Willie's Prayer" and the "Holy Fair" a quality of truth that seems to erode the metal and sink its lines into the plate like an acid. He had fidelity to life in details, and a wonderful freshness in giving detail life-likeness; he had the largeness and freedom of a powerful intellect, and the fierce and at times reckless energy of a great but imperfectly controlled personality.

When he sings the equality and dignity of man as a man, he strikes notes that have reverberated through the English-speaking world; when he sings of the sorrows and sweetness of the home and the tenderness akin to pain of love, he touches the sources of smiles and tears; when he gives free reign to his genius for touching life on the quick, to his rollicking and audacious

humor, and to his fresh and vivid diction, as in "Tam o' Shanter" and "The Jolly Beggars," he achieves, as Matthew Arnold said, "superb poetic success." But Burns is dearer to us most of all in "Auld Lang Syne," in "Duncan Gray," in "Whistle and I'll Come to You, my Lad," and a dozen other songs, compact of the stuff of poetry which, once heard, lingers in the ear and lives in the heart. His was a tenderness akin to tears; piercing pathos; sparkling wit; a manner at once intimate and masterful; a sense of human fate appealingly tragic or touched as by a wing astray from Heaven.

An awful catastrophe has blighted a section of Sicily; but Sicily lies forever smiling and secure in the verse of Theocritus; so simple, so rustic, so instinct with life. So Scotland lies beyond the touch of time and change in the songs of Burns. How deep are the roots of his art in the soil of life, how far below the surface lie the springs of his inspiration, how fresh and vital, how domestic and intimate, how tender and deep is the skill of the heart which has made Burns the best-loved poet of the race, and given his songs the sweetness and the sadness, the mirth and the pathos, of the meetings of lovers and the partings of friends the world over!

We have not forgotten his faults; they too are a part of his story, to be told and retold to the end of time; but how radiantly the light of his genius shines across the storm of his life, full of warning, full of splendor! Let them judge who will; we, at least, will stand silent in the presence of this tragic victory; this mortal infirmity rising to immortal achievement. In his memorable essay Carlyle wrote that the world is habitually unjust to its men of genius; it decides, like a court of law, by dead statutes, and not positively, but negatively, less on what is done right than what is or what is not done wrong. When two ships come to anchor,—one stained and battered and half dismantled, with broken spars and tattered sails, and the other clean and trim, with straight masts and white sails,—before you pass judgment find out what voyages they have made; one may have but crossed the harbor, and the other may have come round the world!\*

HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE.

\* The substance of this article was delivered before the Burns Society of New York on the occasion of the celebration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns.